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ABSTRACT

The technique used by one teacher to incorporate cultural sensitivity into the business French course is described. Cultural orientation begins in the first class meeting with a discussion of shapes and symbols. Discussion proceeds to the hexagon, a geographic, cultural, and linguistic symbol for France. A discussion of French geography and a comparison of French centralization and American decentralization ensues. Modules that provide examples of how culture affects business are integrated into the curriculum throughout the course. Module topics include: human resources; real estate; and international commerce. Content and design of the modules are described briefly, and some supplementary materials used in them are noted. (MSE)

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Strategies for Developing Cultural Awareness in the Business French Class

Cathleen Walsh

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Cathleen Walsh

Title: Strategies for Developing Cultural Awareness in the Business French Class
Presentation time: 20 minutes
Primary Audience: Language Educators
Specific language: French

The Business French curriculum requires an advanced level of proficiency in the basic language skills. However, linguistically correct Business French does not of itself suffice for effective communication in the international marketplace. Language must be infused with an ongoing knowledge of the culture which defines it. In this presentation, I will share specific strategies for developing cultural awareness which have proven successful in my Business French classes.

It is an accepted fact that marketing, and particularly product advertising, derives from a precise cultural knowledge of the target clientele, be it domestic or foreign. What is less obvious is the cultural component of other topics in the Business French curriculum. By using supplementary material from radio, television and the written press I have been able to concentrate on specific business topics while introducing significant cultural elements. Today, I will focus on the ways in which I incorporate cultural awareness into the treatment of three distinct categories: Human Resources, real estate, and international trade.

First of all, I would like to clarify my notion of culture. By culture I mean the characteristic features of, or the behavior typical of, a group of people resulting from a shared heritage, shared experiences and shared knowledge. In a paper on cross-cultural communication delivered st this conference in 1991, Virginia Gorman defined shared knowledge as "the basis by which we communicate and interpret data, such as our knowledge of history, political systems, education, literature and the folk arts." It is important to note that shared language is not necessarily included in a definition of culture. For example, Americans naively expect to communicate effectively with the British because of our common English language. However, our shared knowledge ended in the late 18th century. In fact, great misunderstandings can arise between Americans and their English counterparts because of invisible cultural differences.

Secondly, I would like to specify the underlying pedagogical approach which I favor to achieve so subtle a result as cultural awareness. The key premise is that a student learns best by discovering on his or her own. The instructor becomes more a facilitator than a conduit of data. And, while I want the students to notice, to think, to pinpoint cultural components, be they similarities or differences, to analyze and to synthesize, I must always keep in mind the particular competencies of the students and be ready to intervene. Sometimes it is necessary to inform before one can raise awareness of cultural issues. I have also learned that students often need training to develop critical thinking

skills. In short, by combining a knowledge of data with critical thinking skills, I steer students in the direction of cultural sensitivity. In the end the process is successful because the students acquire not just particular pieces of information, but a method, an approach which will serve them well in any cross-cultural situation.

Specifics.

Perhaps the most significant activity takes place during the first class meeting. I am always aware that business, not culture, is my topic but I take advantage of the introductory session to establish a cultural framework for the course. To set the stage, if you will. So, after distributing the syllabus, explaining the functioning of the course and answering any questions, I devote the remainder of the period to a cultural orientation. The focus is on France, not the whole Francophone world, mainly because of the constraints of a one-semester course.

I begin with a sort of game ostensibly to generate thinking and discussion in French but also to encourage observation and creativity. I display three shapes and inquire what these shapes evoke for the students. The responses elicited may depend on shared cultural or educational knowledge or on individual interests or experiences. Thus, a triangle connotes a variety of answers including: a geometric shape, math, a musical instrument, a sailboat, a traffic sign, triangular trade, etc. A circle connotes math, a doughnut, a lifesaver, a ring, a pie, the notion of continual process, the earth, etc. A hexagon connotes a geometric figure, math. And, if a student has spent a fair amount of time in France, particularly in the French school system, the hexagon will evoke the meaning for which I am searching, i.e., France. Why should that be?, I ask. I hint around until someone relates the shape to the map of France. I then explain that the geographic and geometric symbol of France, the hexagon, is also a cultural and linguistic term for the country. To emphasize this I display a plastic template of l'hexagone which is in every French schoolchild's bookbag. By placing the template on top of the hexagon shape, the point is made visually. Also, I have managed to bring up the issue of geographic literacy. To follow up, I distribute maps of France (Handout) to the students for a brief geography quiz. The quiz consists of listening to a national weather forecast taped from RFI radio and then plotting temperatures on the map. The broadcast first talks generally about the weather conditions in certain regions and then gives temperatures for specific cities. (*Play radio segment) I elicit answers from the class and put the correct ones on the board. When I replay the tape, the students verify the answers and see if they understand better the second or third time. I then ask them to locate the regions which were mentioned and again go over it on the chalkboard. The exercise is non-threatening (no grading) and at the same time eye-opening. They learn that I expect them to be geographically sensitive. At the same time they become aware of the intrinsic value of geographic literacy in today's world.

Next, I engage the students in a brainstorming activity in which we try to explore the differences between a centralized system of government, namely France, the hexagon, and a de-centralized federal system of government such as ours which is comprised of 50 different governing entities. What kind of variations exist between states? I am looking for differences with regard to the driving age, the availability of products, eg guns, the restrictions on when stores can be open and on what they can sell at certain times. What consequences can be drawn from the effects of growing up in a centralized country like France versus a de-centralized one, like the United States? In which is one more likely to develop uniform ways of looking at an issue. Are other cultural repercussions likely? What are examples of shared knowledge or culture at the national level? Generally the responses include familiarity with television and film, knowledge of the educational system, the university system. Occasionally they suggest things like contemporary music which I tell them are more generationally-specific than culturally specific. I mention that, as they might suspect, there exist more frameworks for shared knowledge in France than in the United States. I cite the educational system (l"Education nationale), the health care system (la Securite sociale), the central bureaucracy, TV, radio, film and for Frenchmen, the obligatory military service.

Finally, I explain that while this will be the only class session devoted to culture, qua culture, I hope and expect that they will be sensitive to cultural considerations througout the course.

As the course proceeds, I develop modules using topical examples of how culture affects business. I would like to share some of these with you.

I. Human Resources: I distribute handouts of employment ads which have appeared in the French press and in the American press and ask the students to be prepared in the next class to report on similarities and differences. (Handouts) The students' reactions to the French ads range from mild surprise to complete shock by what they consider to be offensive or incomprehensible or even illegal requisites. Most cite differences with regard to the specific age requirements, gender requirements, and educational requirements. They are baffled by the fact that anyone might want cover letters to be handwritten. And they find it scandalous that photos are generally required. On the other hand, they are impressed with the importance accorded fluency in other languages. Normally excellent oral exchanges ensue from this exercise.

II. Real Estate: Prior to taking up the topic in class, I assign a vocabulary worksheet (Handout) for which students must use a French-French dictionary to define meanings. I also distribute a photocopy of real estate offerings from the classifieds of Le Monde (Handout) which I ask them to study and to prepare. In class we

decode abbreviations of the classifieds for apartments for rent in Paris. Then I ask what they can deduce from the features which are mentioned. eg asc, tt cft, s/cour. What do these features suggest? Historical, cultural or other realities? (I have taped an excellent TV news segment on the issue of rents in Paris and the ramifications of those rents for the moving industry which I can use if time allows.) Next, I ask what kinds of properties are currently available based on this page of classifieds? Chateaux, a priory, a mas, a villa, a demeure. What do the different types of property connote? a chateau : the history of France and the aristocracy as a ruling class; a priory: a religious connotation, the fact that France is essentially a Catholic country; Mas, villa, demeure: regional and architectural characteristics. There are several ads for viagers. I ask the students if they found the text of these ads to be either unfamiliar or unusual? When the meaning of the rubric is clarified, I ask whether or not this exists in the United States in any form? Why might this work or not work in the US? Again, the class discussion is sure to be interesting.

III. International Commerce: The GATT accord has been approved but the last-minute negociations between the US and the EC proved to be particularly dramatic on a number of fronts, most notably: agriculture, the US sanctions against "unfair competition", the aeronautics industry and the most sensitive of all issues, the media sector (l'audiovisuel). I have videotaped a TV segment from the French news which provides an interesting cultural slant to the question of article 301. This article permits the US to take rapid measures of economic retaliation when it is deemed that an imported product benefits from unfair competition. Three previewing activities help make the video more linguistically comprehensible so that the emphasis can be placed on the purely cultural. These include: a matching columns worksheet (Handout), a fill in the blanks worksheet (Handout) and a cassette of the audio segment which the students can listen to ahead of time. We go over the worksheets in class. Prior to showing the video, I ask the students to be attentive to the cultural depiction of Americans compared with that of the Europeans. The segment is such that it assures lively discussion. Some students might even be offended by the kind of steretyping used in the segment. (*Show video)

This segment sets the stage for a discussion of the media issue and what is at stake both economically and culturally. Articles from both the American press and the French press are assigned so as to juxtapose points of view and to provide a solid framework for subsequent discussion. (Handouts) To extrapolate and to follow up on the question of the integrity and viability of the French media industry, I can work with the class on a radio report which discusses the Berlin Film Festival. The report describes how the absolute dominance by Hollywood has created a critical, if not desperate, situation for the German film industry and for the European film industry as a whole. (*Play radio segment). I provide each student with an audiocassette of the piece to listen

to ahead of time. At issue are high stakes questions of production and distrubution. Thanks to all the preparatory activities, we can discuss the issues in an informed manner. For a final cultural insight, I give a dictee, an icon of the French educational experience, from the text of the radio report.

The economic/cultural conflicts at issue in the GATT accord are extremely complex. But that agreement will govern global commerce for the foreseeable future and it is important to be familiar with it. By addressing the cultural questions and ramifications, I try to make the controversy more real and thereby foster increased student comprehension.

Conclusion:

The immediate goal of this marriage of business and culture is to provoke and to orchestrate thoughtful discussion in the Business French class. In the course of the resulting debates, oral proficiency takes on a new importance as business concepts and business-related vocabulary mix with highly personal feelings and as the need to convince emerges. The long-term goal is to train students to develop critical thinking and cultural awareness skills. These skills will enable them in the future to approach both professional and personal situations with a solid understanding of the cultural framework in which they are inscribed.

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EDUCATION

Ph.D. French Studies, Brown University, 1984.
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